

Navy Medicine Celebrates National Women Physicians Day

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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On February 3, 2022, we mark the birth of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910), the first woman in the United States to obtain a Medical Degree (1849). Since 2016, the United States has celebrated her birthday as National Women Physicians Day, a holiday commemorating Dr. Blackwell's many contributions to the field of medicine and for recognizing all women who have followed her example by becoming physicians.

Today, in honor of Dr. Blackwell's 201st birthday, there is no better time to look back at some of Navy Medicine's own pioneering women physicians. The following is a listing of some of the notable Navy Medical Corps milestones.

Notable Milestones:

- In April 1943, Congress approved appointing women physicians and surgeons into the Army and the Navy with the same pay and benefits as men (Public Law 38). Lt. junior grades Achsa Bean, Cornelia Gaskill and Hulda Thelander are among the first women physicians in the Navy. Between 1943 and 1945, 57 female physicians were commissioned into the Navy Medical Corps.
- In June 1948, under the Women's Service Integration Act (Public Law 625), the first (non-nurse) women were sworn in as commissioned officers in regular Navy. And on October 15, 1948, psychiatrist Lt. Cmdr. Frances L. Willoughby became the first female physician in the regular Navy.
- In 1950, Dr. Frances Willoughby earned the distinction as the first woman physician promoted to the rank of Cmdr. and in 1957 became the first female psychiatrist to reach the rank of Captain.
- In the late 1940s, Lt. Cmdr. (later Capt.) Norma C. Furtos helped pioneer the treatment of streptomycin for pulmonary tuberculosis.
- On August 18, 1950, Lt. Cmdr. Bernice Gertrude Rosenthal Walters reported aboard USS Consolation (AH-15) becoming the first female physician to serve aboard a Navy ship and the first ever female Chief of Anesthesiology aboard a hospital ship.
- On November 4, 1955, Dr. Gioconda R. Saraniero earned the distinction as the first woman physician in the Navy to attain the rank of Captain. Capt. Saraniero had been one of the first women physicians to enter in the Navy in 1943 and was also the Navy's first female hematologist.
- In December 1973, Lts. Jane McWilliams and Victoria Voge made history as the first female flight surgeons in Navy history. Dr. McWilliams (later Capt. Jane Hardman) would serve over 20 years in the Navy as a flight surgeon and aviation pathologist.
- On April 25, 1975, Dr. Donna P. Davis was commissioned a Lieutenant in the Navy Medical Corps becoming the first black woman physician in the Navy. Dr. Davis would rise to the rank of Captain and finish her career in the Navy Reserves.



- On July 29, 1975, Dr. Jean E. Todd became the first woman physician to enter the Navy as a direct appointment Captain. She was followed in 1980 by Dr. Haydee Javier Kimmich, an orthopedic surgeon. In 1980, Dr. Kimmich also earned the distinction as the first Hispanic woman physician to attain the rank of Captain.
- In August 1986, Capt. Alice Martinson, one of the first female orthopods in the Navy, took the helm of Naval Hospital Oakland, California. She is the first woman Navy physician to serve as an MTF commanding officer.
- In 1993, Rear Adm. (lower half) Eleanor “Connie” Mariano became the second woman (and first female military physician) to serve as primary physician to a sitting president. She later documented these experiences in her book, *The White House Physician* (2010).
- In April 1996, Capt. Laurel Blair Salton Clark, an undersea medical officer and flight surgeon, became the first female physician in the Navy selected to become an astronaut. From 1997 to 2000, Dr. Clark served in NASA’s Astronaut Office Payloads/Habitability Branch. In 2003, she logged 15 days, 22 hours and 20 minutes in space. Clark was one of two Navy physicians killed on February 1, 2003 when the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated 16 minutes prior to entry. In 2004, Capt. Clark was posthumously awarded the Congressional Space Medal.
- In 1997, Dr. Bonnie B. Potter became the first woman physician to attain the rank of Rear Admiral (lower half). She was soon after followed by Dr. Marian Balsam. Admirals Potter and Balsam were the first two women physicians to command Naval Medical Centers—Potter took the helm of NNMC Bethesda in 1997 and Balsam the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, Virginia in 1998.
- In 2000, Dr. Bonnie Potter was promoted to Rear Adm. (upper half) becoming the first woman physician to earn this distinction. Potter was the highest ranking woman physician in Navy history until 2015 when Dr. Raquel Bono was promoted Vice Admiral. Vice Adm. Bono holds the distinction as the highest ranking woman physician in military history. To date (February 2022), Vice Adm. Bono is also the only woman to serve as Director of the Defense Health Agency (DHA).
- Today, Navy women physicians represent 31% of the Navy Medical Corps. They serve across the globe on ships and at shore stations—Blueside and Greenside—as Commanding Officers, Executive Officers, Directors, Officers in Charge, leaders and medical providers. Across the Navy Medicine Enterprise women physicians are indeed projecting Medical Power for Naval Superiority.

****Do you have other milestone dates that should be included in this listing? If so we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at: usn.ncr.bumedfchva.mbx.bumed-general-inquiries@mail.mil**